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SUBJECT: SQUEEZING ERITREAN FARMERS TO FEED THE TROOPS

11. (U) Why Most Eritreans are Skinny

Most Eritreans are poor farmers who barely scratch out a living in this dry, rocky country. In a good year Eritrea can produce only 80% of its food needs, yet the Issaias regime spurns food aid. UNICEF reports that 40% of children under age five are malnourished. Farmers in the relatively fertile central and south-central regions depend on 11 or 12 inches of rainfall in the rainy season (July and August) to refill reservoirs, wells, intermittent streams, and ponds needed for irrigation. This rainy season has been disappointing; the rest of August needs to be especially wet to avoid major grain shortfalls in the coming year.

12. (SBU) Beware of Government Tractors

While the state officially owns almost all land in Eritrea, families and villages can secure extended land-use rights for "their" farms. Most farmers plow the rocky land with oxen-drawn one-bottom wooden plows tipped with iron. Teenagers and young adults from farm families traditionally undertake with this time-consuming task. However, perhaps 100,000 young people are now sitting in trenches facing Ethiopia. Last year the government provided tractors (driven by National Service conscripts) to plow, plant, and harvest fields if requested by farmers. This service was offered on credit against a share of the final harvest. Many farm families were reportedly shocked to learn that 80% of their crop was required to pay off this "tractor debt" to the government.

13. (SBU) But We Thought Collectivization Didn't Work

The director of a major NGO dealing with the agricultural sector reports that the regime has again sent tractors driven by National Service conscripts to plow and plant on "private" farmland in the central and south-central regions. Unlike last year, the government is not asking if the farmers want to "hire" the government's tractor services; the government is ordering National Service conscripts to plow and plant substantial amounts of farmland without regard to the farmers' wishes. The NGO director fears this may result in the regime taking the entire crop from the government-planted fields, leaving farm families with little more than garden produce and foraging goats on which to survive.

¶4. (SBU) Priority #1: Food for the Trenches

When asked why the government would do this, as it would clearly jeopardize the well-being of hundreds of thousands of farm families, the director said, "They need to get food to the trenches." He stated that hungry farmers are less an immediate threat to the regime's survival than hungry soldiers.

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